

Americans react to wit as Dracula to the Cross. Wit is undemocratic. Its standard modifiers, *rapier* and *stiletto*, were weapons of Renaissance aristocrats. The last witty civilizations, eighteenth-

century France and England, were also the last aristocratic civilizations. After them came the deluge of democracy and the rise of the middle class. Both found their natural homes in America, where the double entendres and bons mots of biting wit fell victim to the desire for respectability and the restraint demanded of the socially mobile. Pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps is a good way to choke; living in dread of saying the wrong thing, Americans rejected wit and embraced that favorite of the self-made man, the tall tale.

Next came the melting pot. Diversity may be good for the body politic but it spells disaster for the funny bone. Wit and its handmaidens, satire and parody, require a strong point of view, a common ground, and a ruthless audience—conditions that conflict with the miasmic national squish we call “consensus.”

Diversity has truncated American wit by depriving us of a national comic figure that everyone knows in his bones. The French have the miser, the Irish have the biddy, the Italians have the jealous husband, the English have the doggy lady, but what does America have?

Paul Bunyan, Dagwood Bumstead, Babbitt the traveling salesman, the Southern senator, the Jewish mother, the Boston Brahmin, and the good ole boy—to name just a few. It sounds like a rich comedic heritage, but one man's aberration is another man's ethos; what is funny to millions of Americans leaves millions of others bemused.

Our diversity also kills the spontaneity that wit must have. Our worst nightmare is that backbone of wit, the generalization. Samuel Johnson's quip, “If you give a Scot something, he'll either break it or drink it,” would cause mass cardiac arrest in the land of the free and the home of Jimmy the Greek. Jesse Jackson and Ted Kennedy would go on *Nightline* and wail, “Some Scots are clumsy drunks but the vast majority of Scottish-Americans are well educated and responsible citizens.”

There goes your sprightly discourse. Proper timing is impossible when compassionate liberals keep popping up and saying *some*.

We are so afraid of giving offense that we have turned into oral basket cases. Not daring to trust each other to filter sweeping statements, we clutter up our speech and writing with awkward adverbial easements like “generally speaking” and “by and large,” dragging in carefully documented exceptions on the grappling hooks of equivocation, getting so tangled up in what we are trying *not* to say that we commit wit's bugbear, unintentional humor. e.g., “Americans of all nationalities.”

Wit goes for the jugular, not the jocular, and it has no “healing power”



whatever. It is, said Dorothy Parker, "the humor of the indifferent," so it is bound to be anathema in a nation where headline writers see nothing funny about "HEARTS GO OUT TO BRAINGLESS BABY." In our frantic pursuit of sensitivity and compassion, we reject corrosive rejoinders in favor of the bland heartiness and tense jocularity of the toastmaster's gentle dig.

Even on the rare occasion when some American actually gets mad, he instinctively tries to blunt his remarks with broad humor. Asked his opinion of Jerry Falwell, Barry Goldwater replied, "Somebody should kick him in the ass." It was supposed to be harmlessly funny, but as Somerset Maugham observed, "There is not much kick in the milk of human kindness." In a similar exchange, America's last aristocrat produced a witticism that would have won plaudits from Samuel Johnson. Asked his opinion of William Jennings Bryan, the frosty Charles Francis Adams said: "He is in one sense Scripturally formidable, for he is unquestionably armed with the jawbone of an ass." Today such a remark would be a candidate for damage control.

Another enemy of wit is American "pragmatism"—i.e., laziness. The pinnacle of wit is the *jeu d'esprit*—wit for its own sake, with no purpose but sheer joy in words. The *jeu d'esprit* should be popular in a country obsessed with games, but it collides with our preference for the quick 'n' easy. It takes a lot of reading and reflection to come up with puns, maxims, epigrams, and ripostes, but Americans can't be bothered. Our wish to be clever without going to the trouble of being learned is reflected throughout our culture, most notably in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, whose notorious italics are a substitute for archness.

The witty woman especially is a tragic figure in America. Wit destroys eroticism and eroticism destroys wit, so a woman must choose between taking lovers and taking no prisoners.

As with stilettos and rapiers, the problem is one of adjectives. A woman who is "sharp," "cutting," and "surgical" is disturbing to men. Wit also demands attitudes that have been bred out of women for centuries. Taught to say, "I love people" and "sex is beautiful," the average woman finds it impossible to summon the sang-froid, contempt, impatience, sarcasm, pessimism, and bawdiness required to crack ice at thirty paces.

If she is married, total solemnity is but a husband away. America's leading expatriate, Henry James, deplored our Noah's Ark complex, saying: "An amiable bachelor here and there doesn't strike me as at all amiss, and I think he too may forward the cause of civilization."

Wit flourished in the conversational salons of the eighteenth century largely because they were not attended by "couples." But American spouses

go everywhere together and spend the evening signaling each other what not to say with daggerish stares, elbows in the ribs, kicks under the table, and hisses of "Shut up!" lest a clever riposte arouse fear and loathing in all the other married couples who go everywhere together.

These are the same people who reply "a good sense of humor" in surveys about the qualities they look for in a mate. They lie. The man who says he wants a wife with a good sense of humor actually is looking for that quality of benumbed resignation found in women known as "good sports"; the woman who says she wants a husband with a good sense of humor actually is looking for someone who won't be mean to the children.

The biggest reason why Americans hate wit is the clouding effect it has on sexual identity. Wit is aggressive and therefore masculine, but it is also waspish and therefore feminine. Therefore, witty people are a little funny.

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